

■ **the rap attack:
an introduction**

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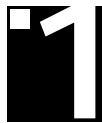


I was rappin' 50 years ago, my rap lyrics were a lot more dirty than those in my songs. And I did the moonwalk 50 years ago.

Cab Calloway to the author, September 1991.

Hip Hop is the one music form that can change, because it thrives on other music forms.

Afro-British rappers, *Definition of Sound*, 1992



Rap music and hip hop culture's ongoing and bewildering love/hate relationship with American society requires a fresh evaluation of the role street culture plays in the continuing evolution of American popular culture. Rap music has been the subject of lawsuits and arguments before the Supreme Court, the target of hellfire-and-brimstone sermons by preachers, and even political ammunition for presidents and presidential candidates.¹ Rap has transformed American fashion with its sneakers, boots, loose-fitting clothes, and "whacked" colors and designs, Hip hop practitioners of "writing" (graffiti) have sparked a renewed interest in street art. Rap has helped fuel the African American cinema resurgence in Hollywood, while several hip hop mavens command leading roles in films and television series. When the genre first appeared in the late 1970s, culture and music critics falsely predicted a quick demise, but rap music grew and flourished, simultaneously reshaping the entire terrain of American popular culture. Even rap music's hyped commercialization cannot dampen its tough, raw, hard-core street essence. Rap music's most powerful safeguard has been its uncanny ability to reenergize itself, to remain "true to the game," in the words of one of Ice Cube's most important rhymes.



Rap music and hip hop culture have not been the subject of much serious scholarship, and a broad-based historical account is needed as the form grows more complicated in both music and style and as more and more of the old-school practitioners disappear from the scene or become victims of the twin scourges of the inner city, violent crime and cocaine. I pay particular attention to rap's pre-history and early history; its structure and culture; its genres and personalities; gender relations; and the impact of rap's commercialization.

Summoning the ancestors

Rap in general dates all the way back to the motherland, where tribes would use call-and-response chants. In the 1930s and 1940s, you had Cab Calloway pioneering his style of jazz rhyming. The sixties you had the love style of rapping, with Isaac Hayes, Barry White, and the poetry style of rapping with the Last Poets, the Watts poets and the militant style of rapping with brothers like Malcolm X and Minister Louis Farrakhan. In the 60s you also had "The Name Game," a funny rap by Shirley Ellis, and radio dj's who would rhyme and rap before a song came on.
Afrika Bambaataa, 1993

Afrika Bambaataa, one of rap music's founders, alludes to several important roots of rap music. Without doubt the African elements are part of rap's foundation. Writing of the African element in African American verbal culture, linguist David Dalby noted in 1972 that "it is at the level of interpersonal relationships and expressive behavior that the black American proletariat has preserved a large part of [its] African character: it is in this area, therefore, that we should expect the survival of African linguistic features."²

It is clear that rappers, like their ancestors, draw on the call-and-response form so common in ritual chanting to the gods, ancestors, or both; and the accumulated traditions of story telling are an essential element in rap music's overall structure. Taking an improvisational cue from their ancestors, rappers invent and reinvent their own vocabulary, adjusting it as the moment may require for recording, stage concerts, or the routines of everyday life. Just as Africans adapted English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese to fit the rules and formal structure of the languages they carried with them during their enslavement, rappers have adapted English to their own conventions and cultural style. When this verbal sorcery is fused with a beat, the resulting product becomes, in the words of old-school rapper Doug E. Fresh, "very African."³ Such old-school rappers have instructed the new-school practitioners in the importance and historical significance of this ver-

bal mastery, so that rap can claim a place alongside gospel music, work songs, jazz, and rhythm and blues in the African cultural unconscious.

Bambaataa also acknowledges Cab Calloway, the grandfather of rap music, whose vocal style borrowed the smooth elegance of scat singing (European vocal formalism joined to a distinctly African rhythm) and translated it into a street vernacular. Calloway called this style “jive scat,” and it swept the country during the depression and lasted well into the 1940s. Calloway did not merely invent a new vocal style but created an entire culture around jive. *The New Cab Calloway’s Hepster’s Dictionary* taught the uninitiated the culture’s basic vocabulary. Hepsters were resplendent in zoot suits with their long jackets and pegged pants, gold watches with long chains, and slicked-back hair (Calloway tossed his repeatedly during his stage shows). Jive scat features the improvisational style characteristic of much African music, but it also includes the call-and-response form. Calloway’s signature tune, “Minnie the Moocher,” is a well-formulated example of this ability to mix vocal and music styles. He recalls the tune’s origins in this way:

During one show that was broadcast over national radio in the spring of 1931, not long after we started using “Minnie the Moocher” as our theme song, I was singing and in the middle of a verse, as it happens sometimes, the damned lyrics went right out of my head. I forgot them completely. I couldn’t leave a blank there as I might have done if we weren’t on the air. I had to fill the space, so I just started to scat sing the first thing that came into my mind. “Hi-de-hi-de-hi-de-ho. Hi-de-hi-de-hi-de-ho. Ho-de-ho-de-ho-de-hee. Oodlee-oodlee-oldyee-oodlee-doo. Hi-de-ho-de-ho-de-hee.” The crowd went crazy. Then I asked the band to follow it with me and I sang, “Dwaa-de-dwaa-de-dwaa-de-do.” And the band responded. By this time, whenever the band responded some of the people in the audience were beginning to chime in as well. So I motioned the band to hold up and I asked the audience to join in. And as I sang the audience responded; they hollered back and nearly brought the roof down.⁴

Calloway’s recollection illustrates the reciprocity between the band and the audience; the band leader moves and shapes the audience’s participation, which then spurs the band leader and band to further improvisation. The kinetic quality of jive scat created a frenzy in the audience. Calloway’s vocal improvisation would become one of the foundations of rap music’s distinctive styles—“freestyle”—where rappers spontaneously engage in open verbal competitions and where the audience may be called on to respond.

Bambaataa further invokes as rap sources the lovers’ raps of the late 1960s, led by soulful balladeers Isaac Hayes and Barry White. This genre used a lengthy monologue over a simple melodic line to recount the pain and peril of love. Hayes’s eighteen-minute rap, “By the Time I Get to Phoenix,” from his debut album, *Hot Buttered Soul*, revolutionized rhythm and blues (or soul music). The Hayes sound provided a cool, passionate, and mellow ease to the dance music that characterized

the golden era of soul. Hayes's female counterpart at Stax Records, Millie Jackson, known for her x-rated raps on men, cheating, love, and sex, pioneered female lovers' rap, and her catchy duets with Hayes became legendary. Her fourth album for Stax featured her rapping to the background of Luther Ingram's smash hit, "If Loving You Is Wrong, I Don't Want to Be Right," a heated monologue on infidelity. Jackson's unique vocal style on stage combined soap-opera theatrics with musings on the entire range of love's joys and hurts, the pleasures of falling in love with married men, and the unbridled lust of sexual adventures. This style would make her the major influence on the female rappers of rap's first wave, as Roxanne Shanté has willingly acknowledged. Finally, Barry White's romantic raps of the disco era set his deep baritone against a complete orchestra complemented by French horns, violins, and cello. White's style was a disco version of the crooning balladeer—a kind of 1970s Billy Eckstine with a distinct rap style. This soulful trio made the rap genre acceptable to the black consumer market, and White's raps were one of the first to cross over into the white middle-class mainstream.

The message-oriented poetry of the Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron laid the groundwork for the political rappers of the 1980s and 1990s. The Last Poets set lyrics to the beat of the conga drum, Gil Scott-Heron to the rhythms of a talented small band, to create a distinctive rap performance style that would have an almost infectious appeal for the masters of the old school and their successors. What characterized this version of rap was its political and social commentary, which did not spare African Americans from criticism. Coming to the fore at the end of the Civil Rights/Black Power movements, these poets invoked the most accessible form of black cultural nationalism—message word play—to reeducate and awaken the masses from the numbing sleep of the Nixon era and the emergence of "benign neglect." What makes Heron's and The Last Poets' style so important to the emergence of rap music is its orality. The poetry's effectiveness comes through only when it is spoken, just like rap. Similarly, black women poets like Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, and others also developed a spoken style that turned words into bullets.⁵

Bambaataa also echoes the rhymes of Muhammad Ali, whose poetic couplets during the peak of his career between 1964 and 1972 provided new inspiration to inner-city youth who specialized in "signifying" or "playing the dozens." This particular form of verbal jousting continues to be quite common in African American and urban culture. Its elaborate set of rules and hidden meanings are designed to insult and ridicule opponents, thus preventing them from responding. Ethnographer Claudia Mitchell-Kernan defines *signifying* as she used it in her fieldwork during the late 1960s:

Signifying. . . refers to a way of encoding messages or meanings which involves, in most cases, an element of indirection. This kind of signifying might best be viewed as an alternative message form, selected for its artistic merit, and may occur embedded in a variety of discourses. . . . The apparent significance of the message differs from its real significance. The apparent meaning of the sentence "signifies" its actual meaning.⁶

Mitchell-Kernan's phrase "apparent significance" is one of the key components of the rap idiom. Appearance becomes reality in the rappers' verbal art, and the extensive use of rhymed couplets (à la Ali) fuses with signifying (insulting) to create the elemental form of rap: "I float like a butterfly, sting like a bee,/There ain't no motherfucker that can rap like me" ("CC Crew Rap," CC Crew).

In addition to these various rhyming styles, the rap style also borrowed extensively from black disc jockeys who engaged in intense verbal competition to ensure and protect their market shares from the 1940s through the early 1960s. These DJs bombed the airwaves with their personal styles, in some cases becoming bigger stars than the artists they were required to play. Daddy O Daylie, Poppa Stoppa, Georgie Woods, Maurice "Hotrock" Hulbert, "Jacko" Henderson, and Herb Kent the "Cool Gent" were just a few of the radio personalities who gave the medium its identity and paved the way for today's radio personalities, from Frankie Crocker to "shock jock" Howard Stern. Central to the DJ verbal style was the elaborate rite of passage of naming, of creating an identity and personality that could not be matched. This naming ritual is another essential element in rap's structure. African American rappers adopt names that confer identity and separate them from the horde, while celebrating attributes that embody the personality the name gives. Rhyming and naming thus become a rapper's birthright, contributing to his or her image and personality.

This brief overview of the sources of the rap tradition suggests the infinite complexity and variety of rap's origins, each of which deserves major research. The rap tradition has been nurtured on the accumulated and residual forms of African and African American music, verbal art, and personal style as well as the constant process of self-innovation within each of these elements. This cultural residue is the source of much of the strength and vitality of rap and African American culture.

The first wave breaking

It is difficult to pinpoint the birth date of rap music. Although historians and critics will likely quibble over the exact time, old-school masters like Afrika Bambaataa, Grandmaster Flash, and Kool Herc generally agree that rap was born in 1974 in the South Bronx. The term *rap* came later, but Bambaataa claims he borrowed the term *hip hop* from Lovebug Starski when he began as a DJ:

I started naming my jams, "hip-hop jams." Before scratching, there was just plain mixing. You would take a 30 second portion of a record and keep it going. Then you had breakdancing, the Hustle, deejaying, and then came rappers who just talked regularly over the music. Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five along with Melle Mel started the rhyming. Myself and Soulsonic Force would use clichés like "Rock It, Don't Stop It," and "Shock the House." When rhyming started, that's when everybody started boasting about themselves, the flyest girls, and how many girls you could get in one

night. 1975 is when hip hop started coming into prominence throughout the Bronx, New York City, and stretching into Connecticut and New Jersey.⁷

Grandmaster Caz, another old-school master, has a different take on rap's early history. He identifies a distinct Jamaican lineage in early hip hop. Kool Herc (Clive Campbell) left Kingston in 1967 for the Bronx, bringing the "toast and boast" tradition of roots reggae, itself the product of the yard culture of West Kingston, and the food on which all of reggae superstardom was fed. Yard DJs brought huge speakers and turntables to the slums, where they rapped over the simple bass lines of the ska and reggae beats to create a style uniquely Jamaican. Artists like U Roy and Big Youth were the grandfathers of the trend that today we call dance hall, a musical genre that, like rap, prided itself on its yard cultural roots. The turntable and vinyl enabled the DJ to lyricize spontaneously about everything from love to the plight of the Jamaican masses. Caz claims that "the hip hop movement started with Kool Herc. Actual rap didn't start until later. It was deejaying and breakdancing at first. Not everybody even had a mic. It was just about your beats. Who had the baddest beats. Me too, I was deejaying."⁸ The old-school masters essentially agree that the foundation of rap music is the beat. The beat is the structure around which the lyrics are developed, and samples of selected phrases from previously recorded music, jingles, solos, and so on play second fiddle. In rap vernacular, those with the "dope" beats produce the "deffest" raps.

These two takes on rap's origins cannot be minimized. The DJ ruled during hip hop's early days, and it was the DJ who established the foundations for the lyricist (the MC). The DJ's style was determined by the beats he was able to exploit from the countless riffs, solos, traps, and thousands of other snippets of sound in the audio treasure chests at his disposal. It was sound that molded the first wave of hip hop. Most popular in shaping the break-beat music of early hip hop was the percussion break popular among many groups of the 1970s like Mandrill and War, but the original source of the percussion beat has never been identified. I contend that the introduction of percussion beats in the dance music of the 1970s and in early hip hop were products of Latin music's powerful influence on New York and New Jersey popular culture. The Cuban son, Puerto Rican salsa, and Dominican (and Haitian) merengue were all driven by percussion-based bands, and many black and Puerto Rican young adults freely borrowed from this source in developing their own musical styles. One of the ironies of the African diaspora is that the musical foundations of the motherland would take such a basic element as percussion, syncretize it with European modernist elements, and create an entirely new musical form. This Latin/Jamaican lineage reveals more about the cultural continuities of the slave experience and its consequences than it does about the regional, linguistic, and cultural differences of the slaves' descendants. Afrika Bambaataa noted that DJs like Kool Herc would find one or two percussion beats/breaks and keep them going, infecting the crowd of dancers, who would boo an MC or singer. "The Beat Goes On" was the slogan of hip hop's first wave.

It is unfortunate, and another sad episode in the history of popular music, that Kool Herc and Grandmaster Caz would never enjoy the fruits of the musi-

cal form they gave birth to in the late 1970s. Left out of hip hop's early orbit, these pioneering DJs are being rediscovered today as new-school rappers delve into the sources of their own histories.

Sampling and mixing and jumping for joy

Kool Herc's place in the pantheon of hip hop's underground DJs was usurped by a young wizard, Grandmaster Flash, an expert in the electronic technology of beat creation:

I was in the experimentation phase of trying to lock the beat together. I had to be able to hear the other turntable before I mixed it over. This is when I meet Pete DJ Jones. . . . I'm saying to myself, wow, how can he take these records and blend them on time, keep this music going without missing a beat? He told me what to do and to my amazement, wow, you can actually hear the other turntable before you play it out to the people. . . . I knew that inside the unit it was a single pole, double throw switch, meaning that when it's in the center it's off. When it's to the left you're listening to the left turntable and when it's to the right you're listening to the right turntable. I had to go to the raw parts shop downtown to find me a single pole double throw switch, some crazy glue to glue this part to my mixer, an external amplifier and a headphone. What I did when I had all this soldered together, I jumped for joy.⁹

Flash's technical skill paved the way for record sampling and helped launch the rap revolution. The crucial role of technical know-how and innovation in rap echoes in Andrew Ross's observation on the "capacity of popular music to transmit, disseminate and render visible 'black' meanings, precisely because of, and not in spite of, the industrial forms of production, distribution and consumption."¹⁰ More than any previous form of music, hip hop represents democratized technology. Rappers have continued to reinvent the musical form by mastering the techniques of multitracking, the mixing and remixing of samples. Mark Costello and David Foster Wallace summarize this technique:

Multi-tracking—using recorders that could capture and play back on 2 (as in stereo), 4 (as in 67's then ear-shattering, Sergeant Pepper's Lonely HeartS Club Band), 12, 16, and today 24 parallel tracks, eliminating the hiss of transference from one machine to the next. Rhythms, melodies, harmonies could all be captured on separate tracks, allowing the performer/producer to mix and listen and remix, adding vocals or lead instruments on yet another track. Rap Edisons like Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, and Afrika Bambaataa began as party djs, not musicians. Their wiring of twin turntables to a mixer, allowing them to "scratch" the sound of 2 different records while rapping into a mike, was a kind of crude, extemporaneous multi-tracking. . . . Digital Recording. . . is a technology that converts music to codes, or "digits." The codes are read by a computer,



one combining sophisticated sound-to-code translation hardware with a numbers crunching COS and a high-response synthesizer, at speeds of 40,000 digits per second and up. The recorded sounds, reduced to numbers, can be shaped, mangled, muffled, amplified, and even canonized. Hardware then translates the digits, as read and altered, back into sound, which itself can be re-recorded on multi-track and combined with yet more sounds. The result: hiss-free reproduction on an infinity of tracks, each of which . . . can itself be manipulated infinitely.¹¹

This technological breakthrough allowed DJs to exploit an infinite number of samples from vinyl, advertising jingles, television sitcom themes, and movie sound tracks. It is sampling and mixing that gives rap music its self-renewing character. With multitracking elevated to both high art and technology, studios and producers became as essential to hip hop as DJs and MCs. Producers and DJs could now reach farther and farther into the repositories of sound for surprising samples and snippets, developing another key element in the hip hop equation—what’s old is always new.

But this essential element in hip hop’s evolution has been challenged by the corporate and legal gurus who control the record industry, particularly the publishing aspect. In a series of legal challenges, it has been argued that digital sampling is a violation of the legal code of fair use. Much of the legal debate revolves around the issue of “substantial similarity.” Since most, if not all, samples are altered, does the use of these altered samples constitute copyright infringement? Entertainment lawyer Jason Marcus commented on the complexity generated by this issue:

The issue of substantial similarity raises a number of questions in sound recording cases. Many of the questions were raised in the *United States v. Taxe*, wherein the defendant re-recorded music from records and tapes, adding new sounds, and changing speed, reverberation, and volume. The court used the test of substantial similarity to hold that the defendant’s “piracy” had indeed infringed plaintiffs copyright. However, the court failed to explain how the substantial similarity test should be applied in the sound recording context. As such, there appears to be some degree of confusion in the courts on the issue. A digital sample is almost a *per se* admission of “similarity” in the sense that it is indeed the actual sound that is being appropriated. The *Taxe* case would probably leave the question of appropriation to the prior fact, with the instruction being to determine whether or not the defendant had indeed utilized the actual recording of the plaintiff, as pronounced in section 114(b) of the Copyright Act.¹²

The issue of substantial similarity has rocked the hip hop nation. In 1991 the Federal District Court of Manhattan found the clown prince of hip hop, Biz Markie, guilty of copyright infringement for using parts of Gilbert and Sullivan’s tune “Alone Again (Naturally)” and ordered Warner Brothers to remove Markie’s release “I Need a Haircut” from distribution. In another case Aaron

Fuchs of Tuff City Records filed suit against Def Jam Records, charging that the producers had illegally sampled a Tuff City drum track from a 1973 recording by the Honeydrippers, “Impeach the President,” on two singles by L.L. Cool J and another by the now disbanded EPMD. If Fuchs wins this suit, recording and producing rap as we now know it would become financially impossible, given the prohibitive costs of clearing rights to use samples. This thorny business and legal issue reveals how a street form of art and culture (“straight up nigger music,” as Afrika Islam calls it) has become locked in a bad marriage with corporate capitalism and the culture industry it supports. Since sampling is one of rap’s multiple essences, any threat to restrict or regulate its artistic sources could put the very core of this music in jeopardy. The outcome of the sampling controversies will affect the future of rap recording and may eventually force it to return to its street and public roots. (A major victory for the artistic side of rap came in March 1994, when the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Luther Campbell’s sampling of Roy Orbison’s “Pretty Woman” on the grounds that parody does not jeopardize the originality of a recorded song.)

Following Flash’s invention of the sampling machine, DJs came to carry weight and develop followings only to the extent that they were able to tap a huge catalogue of records (and other sounds) for sampling. Sampling was and is hip hop’s ongoing link with history and tradition, including all of the African and African American musical genres; so one can say that hip hop generates its own history by recycling music and reintroducing the previous musical genres to new audiences and markets. Afrika Bambaataa recalls:

The Bronx wasn’t really into radio music no more. It was an anti-disco movement. . . . Everybody wanted the funky style that Kool Herc was playing. Myself, I was always a record collector and when I heard this DJ, I said, “Oh I got records like that.” I started digging in my collection. When I came on the scene after him I built in other types of records and I started getting a name for master of records. I started playing all forms of music. Myself, I used to play the weirdest stuff at a party. . . . I’d throw on the Pink Panther theme for everybody who thought they was cool like the Pink Panther, and then I would play “Honky Tonk Woman” by the Rolling Stones and just keep that beat going. I’d play something from metal rock records like Grand Funk Railroad. “Inside Looking Out” is just the bass and drumming. . . . I’d throw on “Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band”—just that drum part. . . . I’d throw on the Monkees, “Mary, Mary”—just the beat part where they’d go “Mary, Mary, where are you going?”—and they’d start going crazy.¹³

Dissin’ goes commercial

Until 1979 rap was a key component of a flourishing underground culture in the Bronx and upper Manhattan, where parties went on all night in seedy nightclubs or the music was played in schoolyards and small public parks. Speakers, turnta-

bles, mixers, and the inevitable array of breakdancers nurtured rap's public roots and its reclamation of public spaces (the subject of Tricia Rose's essay in this volume). Distribution was by word of mouth or by the most democratic of technologies, the audio cassette tape, and that's how hip hop's early pioneers cultivated their personalities and followings.

Rapping then resembled some of the singing styles of 1940s and 1950s black dance music synthesized with the technology of the 1970s. The MC, as the rapper was known, developed a basic lyrical style, mixing elements of street jargon and slang, personal experience, and an occasional dose of humor to create a pot-pourri of simple verses that could function as both match and counterpoint to the DJ. An MC would embrace elements of Jamaican-African American "toasts and boasts," the "signifying" tradition, lovers' laments, and the tones and cadences of African American and Afro-West Indian preachers to create a personal style. MCs had to be authoritative, assertive, and hard-hitting. Dissin' (insulting or putting down) the competition became the cornerstone of early rap's style. The put-down—shooting an opponent or competitor with words, while boasting of one's own lyrical and rhyming abilities—characterized the dis as in Run DMC's example from "Sucker MCs":

You're a five-dollar boy and I'm a million dollar man
You're a sucker MC and you're my fan
You try to bite lines from friends of mine,
But you're very banal, you're just a sucker MC
You sad-faced clown.

The dis element informs all rap styles, and MCs must be able to perform dis to gain a modicum of acceptance and respect. It has been argued that the dis element in rap reinforces the macho tendency in African American male culture.

The force and style of several personalities gave rap the allure of a new and potentially important art form, still unnoticed by the recording giants of records, television, and movies. Uptown Manhattan and the Bronx were taken over by wave after wave of young black and Latino b-boys and b-girls, blasting their boom boxes with an arsenal of cassette tapes made and distributed by hip hop's royalty—Afrika Bambaataa, Kool Herc, and Grandmaster Caz. As the disco era collapsed in its own decadence, DJs had begun to take notice of the slick instrumentation and production skills that had made disco such a dominant force. One of the genre's last gasps, Chic's "Good Times," became the guiding sample behind rap's first commercial hit, "Rappers Delight" by the Sugar Hill Gang. Rap then exploded commercially. Joe and Sylvia Robinson had recorded several hits, including 1968's "Love Is Strange" and Sylvia's solo 1972 smash, "Pillow Talk." The Robinsons founded Sugar Hill Records, named after the center of black middle-class Harlem. "Rappers Delight" reached number thirty-six on the U.S. charts and became the largest-selling twelve-inch record ever at the time. Though this was not the first rap record—the first was the disco dance group the Fatback Band's single, "King Tim 111 ((Personality Jock))"—"Rapper's Delight"

was the first major rap hit and established both rap and Sugar Hill Records as forces to be reckoned with.¹⁴

What made the “Rappers Delight” so important in the history of hip hop was the speedy staccato word play and verbal dexterity layered over the instrumentation of Chic’s “Good Times.” Part of the initial fascination with the “Rappers Delight” was the novelty of the genre with its emphasis on word play and games. Lyrical manipulation would become an important part of hip hop from that moment on. “Rappers Delight” was followed by an even more ambitious lyrical melange by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, “Superrappin’,” which marked Flash’s transition from DJ to MC in an incredible brew with true old-school flavor:

It was a party night, everybody was breakin’
The highs were screamin’ and the bass was shakin’
And it won’t be long till everybody know when that
Flash was on the beat box goin’ that
Flash was on the beat box goin’ that
and/ and/ and/ and
Italian, Caucasian, Japanese, Spanish, Indian, Negro and Vietnamese
MC’s disc jockeys to all the fly kids and the young ladies
Introducin’ the crew ya got to see to believe.
We’re one, two, three, four, five mc’s
I’m Melle Mel and I rock it so well
And I’m Mr. Ness because I rock the best
Raheim in all the ladies’ dreams
And I’m Cowboy to make you jump for joy
I’m Creole—solid gold
The Kid Creole playin’ the role.

David Toop describes the Furious Five’s innovative and influential style, in which “lines were divided up between individuals and cut in with unison ensembles and solos which highlighted the different vocal qualities and styles.”¹⁵ These hip hop trailblazers would establish the group sound of rap in which different rappers alternated, taking a verse and infusing it with their own personality and style. Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five became rap’s first successful group. The next major rap personality was Kurtis Blow, whose 1979 hits “Christmas Rappin’ ” and “The Breaks” made him rap’s first commercial success on a white label—Mercury. Son of a middle-class family and a City College graduate, Blow is significant in hip hop history for two reasons: he became one of the first solo performers, and his career was managed by the young Russel Simmons, soon to become the godfather of much of hip hop music and culture. Like that of a lot of early rap, Blow’s lyrical style was characterized by a traditional macho posture. Bare chested and dookie chained (wearing the heavy gold chains that were a feature of rap’s first male wave), Blow performed on New York City playgrounds and came to national attention when he was profiled by ABC’s 20/20 in 1980. His

raps have' a comic aspect along with folk wisdom, "drylongso" that is an essential part of African American culture, as in this one from "The Breaks":

If your woman steps out with another man
(That's the breaks, that's the breaks)
And she runs off with him to Japan
And the IRS says they want to chat
And you can't explain why you claimed your cat
And Ma Bell sent you a whopping bill
With eighteen phone calls to Brazil
And you borrowed money from the mob
And yesterday you lost your job
Well, these are the breaks
Break it up, Break it up, Break it up.

The financial success of Sugar Hill Records prodded the corporate recording industry, forever in search of novelty and new markets, to investigate this emerging genre and to sign prospective artists. The early 1980s witnessed the planting of hip hop within the large record companies and the assignment of agents to pursue this new street sound. Not only did hip hop's emergence signal a major shift in popular music, but its fashion, style, and signature art form—graffiti—were beginning to command attention as well.

Unlike his peers, Afrika Bambaataa was a charismatic Bronx gang leader who used his organizational prowess and the ritual codes of the Zulu Nation to create one of hip hop's most authentic sounds. In 1982, his smash single "Planet Rock" set the music world on fire. Borrowing samples from the German "techno-rock" group Kraftwerk's "Trans-Europe Express" and making skillful use of the TR 808 drum machine, Bambaataa gave birth to the sound he called "electro funk," a fusion of the synthesized beats of disco with the sound-system bass of early Jamaican dance hall. This new beat incorporated much of the newly emerging industrial music that was influencing rock and heavy metal. Bambaataa became one of the most important and creative DJs in rap's first years. As Melle Mel told the British rap magazine *HHC (Hip-Hop Connection)*, "When Bambaataa made 'Planet Rock' it hurt all the other rappers. . . . They (Bambaataa) was the only ones to have this real futuristic, synthesized sound. It hurt us because it tipped everything into a different dimension." Bambaataa's innovative style depended on picking samples unfamiliar to an already sophisticated hip hop audience. As Bambaataa commented, "I was really heavy into Kraftwerk and Yellow Magic Orchestra and I wanted to be the first black group to release a record with no band, just electronic instruments."¹⁶ His musical ideology as expressed in "Planet Rock" was really quite simple—to encourage the fun life and a "funky good time":

You gotta rock it, pop it, 'cause it's the century
There is such a place that creates such a melody

World's but a land of a master jam,
 get up and dance
 It's time to chase your dreams
 Up out your seats, make your body sway
 Socialize, get down, let your soul lead the way
 Shake it now, go ladies, it's a living dream
 Love Life Live.

Though lyrically simple, “Planet Rock” paved the way for the introduction of funk, techno, and drum synthesizers into rap music—forms of instrumentation essential to the DJ’s musical arsenal. Bambaataa remarked in 1993 that electro funk gave birth to freestyle rap, the Miami bass sound, and house music. His pioneering rap style would force rap music to transform itself throughout the 1980s. Bambaataa and the Soul Sonic Force were no strangers to fashion either. The disco era’s feathers, sequins, and whacky pseudoproletarian camp (the Village People) were on the wane. Bambaataa’s style was an Africanized version of George Clinton’s black-to-the-future Parliament Funkadelic. Carved African walking sticks, elaborate wildlife headdresses (strikingly similar to those worn by the Mardi Gras Indian tribes of New Orleans), and the infamous “Zulu” beads (a black beaded necklace featuring a black medallion carved with a figurine that resembles an African masthead with the smile face) made a bold fashion statement. Bambaataa and his crew would also, on occasion, dye their hair punk orange, purple, and pea green. He called this look the “wildstyle,” and during performances, his crew’s appearance mesmerized the audience as much as their music did.

The beat meets the break

These early trends in hip hop set the tone for the blossoming of rap during the Reagan years. New groups with distinctive styles and gimmicks (“props,” in the current hip hop idiom); the growing domination of the hip hop attitude, style, and music on youth culture; and, perhaps most important, its lurch into the crossover market made hip hop the defining cultural expression of the eighties generation. Hip hop’s identity broadened in 1983 as the breakdancing craze swept the shopping malls and inner-city playgrounds of America. The beat meets the break, and they both meet the rhyme. It is unfortunate that the Puerto Rican link to what has been categorically classified as an African American cultural form has been so ignored (though the essays by Mandalit del Barco and Juan Flores in this volume correct that omission). In 1977, Puerto Rican DJ Charlie Chase began hanging out with a group called the “Monterey Crew.” They were already immersed in the b-boy style characterized by athletic sweatsuits, Kangol caps, untied designer sneakers, and a passion for the black funk music of the time—James Brown and Parliament Funkadelic. Breakin’ was a set of specific dance moves done on playgrounds and club dance floors in the late 1970s and early 1980s: from twists and spins, headstands, and elaborately orchestrated footwork to the standard individual dance

moves of “top rockin’ and up-rockin’.” Breakdancing is part classical, part popular dance, part street body language, and part performance art. South Bronx Puerto Rican young adults used St. Martin’s Catholic Church as a battleground for breakdance competitions, and out of these contests came several of the best-known groups—The Disco Kids (TDK), the Apache Crew, Star Child LaRock, and the best known of breakdancing’s first wave, the Rockwells. Colon, Ken Rock, Frosty Freeze, Mania, and Take became the core of the Rock Steady Crew, the first breakdancing group to merit national attention and to be featured at one of hip hop’s most important clubs, the now defunct Club Negril. These appearances caused media-industry moguls to take notice, and the Rock Steady Crew appeared on a number of late-night television shows as well as being featured in hip hop’s first films, *Breakin’* and *Beat Street*. The precise way in which the Rock Steady Crew executed the dance form became yet another element in expanding the use of the basic beat with the rap form; breakdancers could not break without the correct beats—thus their essential relationship to the DJ. But breakdancing did not survive corporate America’s raid on hip hop culture, probably because it was truly street art. As hip hop matured, and as it continues to be shaped by the video medium, authentic breakdancers have been replaced by “video hos,” fly girls, and fly boys.¹⁷

Catching the second wave

By the early 1980s, hip hop had attained a prominent place in American popular culture. The new personalities of the second wave—Run DMC, L.L. Cool J, and Kool Moe Dee and Big Daddy Kane—epitomized a combination of street style and musical minimalism. More than any other single group or force, Run DMC catapulted rap into the crossover mainstream. Produced by Russel Simmons (now head of the Def Jam hip hop empire) and Rick Rubin, the *wunderkind* of early rap, Run DMC’s sound symbolized the merger of the black urban street sound with a slick pop overlay. The crew’s lives were parlayed into a collective biography, *Tougher Than Leather*, and a feature film, *Krush Groove*, both early efforts in rap’s growing command of the lucrative youth market. This is how music critics Havelock Nelson and Michael Gonzales summarized the Run DMC aura:

Although they were products of suburbia (the neatly trimmed, upwardly mobile neighborhood of Hollis, Queens), Run DMC were raised under the influence of television and super-movie heroes like Kojak and Shaft, a part of the Black middle-class that was able to romanticize the images of distinction and chaos: nodding heroin addicts, bombed out buildings, trash-filled streets. This was, in the rushed words of rap mogul Russel Simmons, “the difference between fantasy and reality. In Queens you could hang out on the corner, but there was safety in the house, in Queens, one could be part of a gang, but it was part of a growing up process—in the ghetto it’s a life-style.”¹⁸

Decked out in black fedoras, unlaced Adidas sneakers, sweatsuits, and “dookie gold,” the crew of Run DMC became hip hop’s first real personalities. In harsh disses to rappers of the first wave (Afrika Bambaataa and the Soul Sonic Force, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, and the Fearless Four), these middle-class upstarts proclaimed, “No leather suits and no homo boots” to their masqueraded seniors. Hence, they were “tougher than leather.” Run DMC’s career peaked in 1986 with the album “Raising Hell.” It contained hip hop’s first MTV hit, “Walk This Way,” performed with the aging heavy-metal rocker group, Aerosmith, which launched hip hop into the crossover market. The album went platinum and led to widespread coverage of hip hop culture by the mainstream media.¹⁹ But Run DMC’s 1990 comeback attempt flopped, and the group reappeared in 1993 with a new look, a new album, and new “props.”

L.L. Cool J, also from the black middle-class haven of Hollis, Queens, developed a new style that made him the king of the genre lovers’ rap. His second album, “Bigger and Deffer,” contained the amazingly successful single “I Need a Love,” where he pants and whispers, elevating him to instant stardom. He carefully crafted an image of a cool and elegant ladies’ man armed with raps that would make women swoon. In his 1989 release “Walking with a Panther,” L.L. posed with three black women, a bottle of Moet, a cellular phone, and a black panther on a thick gold “dookie” chain. This cultivated image directly challenged the political rappers whose intimidating styles and lyrics allegedly sent rap in an anti-white direction. Political rappers castigated L.L.’s lovers’ rap as a commercial sellout and labeled him a “ho.” In true rap fashion, he responded with a highly successful and quotable dis, “Mama Said Knock You Out,” in which he posed as a fighter in the ring ready to take on all comers.

Fat boys and b-girls

Among other surprisingly original acts in rap’s second wave, the Disco 3, who became the Fat Boys, were the architects of the comic rap style. Their onstage antics earned them the nickname the “Three Stooges of Rap,” and their outrageously funny lyrics reminded the mass audience that rap could maintain an innocence while being true to its roots. The core of the group was Darren “Human Beat Box” Robinson, whose uncanny vocal ability to duplicate the beats of the electronic drum machine made him the equivalent of a circus sideshow (Doug E. Fresh did the same thing, but in a far more serious vein). The group’s first release, “The Fat Boys,” in 1984 was a huge success, with lyrics like:

Yeah, I’m overweight
 . . . Now it started off when I was very small
 I devoured chocolate cakes: plates, candles and all

The Fat Boys, rap’s first crossover act, starred in films—including the outrageously stereotypical *Disorderlies*—that paved the way for other comedy rappers: Biz Markie, the Afros, and Digital Underground.

In rap's first and second waves were equally charismatic crews of women who commanded the attention of male rappers and the music industry alike with a woman's point of view and, more to the point, a "sister's" point of view. I will return to these women rappers but want to note here an important recording "dis and dismiss" battle in the early 1980s essential to uncovering rap's hidden history—the Roxanne syndrome. It was important for two reasons: it elevated dis rap to new heights, and it injected a feminist current into the rap mainstream. In 1984 the male group UTFO recorded "Roxanne, Roxanne," basically the story of a black American princess who candidly rejects three male suitors. This smash single prompted numerous responses from black and Latino women, led by a fourteen-year-old b-girl from the Queensbridge projects in Long Island City, Lolita Shanté Gooden, who took the stage name Roxanne Shante and wrote a response, "Roxanne's Revenge":

I turned you down,
 without a frown
 Embarrassed you in front of your friends
 made you look like a clown
 And all you do is get real mad
 And you talk about me and make me look bad?!

Her rap was followed by the "The Real Roxanne," performed by a woman who called herself the Real Roxanne:

Me, the Rox, give up the box?
 So you can brag about it for the next six blocks
 Where's the beef? You guys can't deal it
 I need a man who can make me feel it

The Roxanne cycle pitted b-boy against b-girl in the eternal battle of the sexes. Through the codes of ritualized insult, a slowly emerging feminist consciousness began to bore into rap's traditional male bravado. Women rappers were staking a claim on the traditionally male preserve of hip hop. Dissin' male suitors, in the male style, revealed women rappers' competence at rhyming; but this early feminist style also showed that rap could become a vehicle for calling attention to the problems and issues that face young inner-city women who routinely battle what the fictional Roxanne rhymes about—sexual harassment and leering by arrogant male suitors.

Rap's second wave, with its messages encoded in standard themes in African American and Latino culture—love, boasting, macho, and humor—included several new artists whose rhyming styles tapped the pulse of the inner city by documenting the pain, anguish, and social and moral crises of their generation. This school of rappers projected a style and demeanor that has helped to stigmatize rap music to the present day. Young black men are viewed as nihilistic, prone to anarchic violence, misogynistic, and greedy for the lucre associated with the trade in crack cocaine. This has made black men targets and scapegoats for both the

police and “five-ohs” (street slang for narcotics officers). Rappers who promoted this style on the East Coast were led by the reclusive Schooly D of Philadelphia, whose explicit lyrics raised the ire of the music industry and state authorities alike. In his “I Don’t Like Rock and Roll,” he boasts: “Rock ’n Roll livin’ is a thing of the past / So all you long-haired faggots can kiss my ass,” Schooly D’s rhymes are the musical backdrop for the films of Abel Ferrara, *King of New York*, which follows the murderous career of an idiosyncratic cocaine dealer played by Christopher Walken, and *The Bad Lieutenant*, in which Harvey Keitel plays a rogue New York City detective given to binges of booze, crack, and freak sex. Schooly D’s rhymes are the lyrical equivalent of a world sunk in degeneration. His “Signifying Rapper” (with a hypnotic Led Zeppelin loop) is a tour de force, a kind of ghetto Brer Rabbit tale replete with gruesome violence, homophobia, and sexual perversion: “He say he know you Daddy, and he’s a faggot / And your mother’s a whore. / He says he seen you sellin’ asshole / Door to door.” Schooly D’s twisted genius lies in his ability to paint a lyrical picture of inner-city decay. But his persona led other rappers to create equally hardened characters whose quirkiness was magnified in their lyrical and stylistic sophistication.

No one embodies these traits more than Slick Rick, whom journalist Adario Strange describes as “one half eccentric recluse, and 50% of the environment.” He goes on to note, “While almost everyone has shed their gold in favor of beads, Slick seems to have increased his unmatched array of gold chains and rings. In the midst of the Afrocentric wave of rhymes, Rick has been true to the universal style of storytelling.”²⁰ Slick Rick’s twisted male bravado was articulated in his second release for Def Jam, “The Great Adventures of Slick Rick.” His unique voice (which cannot be classified and may be rooted in his West Indian heritage) combined with a narrative style of rhyming made him one of the truly original favorites in rap’s second wave. But his misogyny, homophobia, and sexual obsession drew the wrath of the popular music critics. In “Treat Her Like a Prostitute,” he calls on black men to treat all black women as whores:

Now ya been with your girlfriend for quite awhile
 Plans for the future, she’s having your child
 Celebrate with friends drinking cans and quarts
 Telling all your friends about your family thoughts
 One friend was drunk so he starts to get wild
 He tells the truth about the kid
 It’s not your child
 Acting like a jerk and on his face was a smirk
 He said, “Your wife went berserk while you was hard at work
 And she led him on and on and tried to please him
 She didn’t waste time, she didn’t try to tease him”
 Treat `em like a prostitute (Do what?)
 Don’t treat no girlie well until you’re sure of the scoop
 `Cause all they do is hurt and trample.

In a 1989 interview with Armond White, Rick defended his attitudes toward women with typical male-rap bravado, boasting of his ability to get into a woman's mind: "I know how to get a male to succeed without success getting in his way. . . . In this world, if you don't know a person's mind, you'll never know if they're telling the truth or not. The best thing to do is to go for yours yourself. Make your move."²¹ The "Ruler's" gangstastyle doesn't end with his rhetoric. He was convicted of attempted murder in 1991 and sentenced to three and a half to ten years in prison, where he served on a work-release program until his release in late 1995.

Gangstas with attitude

Rap's second wave washed over Miami, Houston, and even Atlanta as a creative frenzy and hip hop's promise of instant fame and fortune inspired inner-city youth. Rivaling New York/New Jersey as the hip hop capital are the postindustrial metropolises of California. Gangsta rap is a product of the gang culture and street wars of South Central Los Angeles, Compton, and Long Beach and the retro-mack (the resurgence of the pimp attitude and style) culture of East Oakland. The gangsta was epitomized by the now defunct group NWA (Niggas with Attitude), which consisted of the MCs Dr. Dre, Ezy-E, Ice Cube, and MC Ren, and the still active and controversial Ice-T. This genre in rap music has given rap its criminal image and raises the whole question of authenticity.

In their 1988 hit "----- the Police," set against a sampling backdrop of droning synthesizers, NWA captured the essence of young black male rage: "A young nigger on the warpath / And when I finish, it's gonna be a bloodbath / Of cops dyin' in LA" Released during a period of intense debate about legal challenges to artistic freedom, "----- the Police" prompted an immediate reaction from police organizations all over the country and even led to an FBI investigation. Tipper Gore's organization, the Parents' Music Resource Center (PMRC), which had already been engaged in monitoring heavy-metal lyrics for allusions to satanism and other cult tendencies, now turned its attention to rap. Gore's call for parental advisory labeling on rap recordings and for industry regulation of rap artists echoes the massive reaction that greeted the arrival of rock 'n' roll as it swept small-town and suburban America during the early 1950s. This wave of reaction only strengthened gangsta rap's commercial appeal. The performance aspect of these "studio gangstas" is a complex matter that has not been carefully analyzed. Yes, there are authentic original gangsta (OG) rappers as the 1993 releases of the Bloods and Crips demonstrate, but much of gangsta rap is Hollywood hype. And that disturbs a lot of OGs (original gangstas who are actual gang members): "I'm fed up with buster [hustlers] like NWA. A lot of my homies in the neighborhood died, man, and what the niggers did was market our life and our image. All them niggers in NWA is buster! They never give back to the neighborhood."²²

The gangsta rap craze reflects the twin maladies of de industrialization and lumpen proletarianization, as Robin Kelley persuasively argues in this volume. It bears no resemblance to the message-oriented, political, or neonationalist genres

of rap but instead celebrates hustling, street crime, women abuse, and the gun as social equalizer. Its blatant antiauthoritarianism recalls past generations of youthful rebellion, but its brutal verbal raging borders on anarchy. Instead of becoming a vehicle for a regenerative antiauthoritarianism (so necessary in an age of growing right-wing cultural fanaticism) in youth culture and black youth culture in particular, the gangsta style nurtures hysteria. The success of the gangsta-rap phenomenon can in part be attributed to the widespread press and television coverage the controversies about the genre command. Profiles have been done by all three networks, and the MTV "rockumentary" series included a thirty-minute segment showing how far into the heartland the mania has spread; from Los Angeles through the great plains of Omaha and Iowa City, the gangsta attitude sells not only records but "being real."

Ice-T's phenomenal success paralleled that of NWA. His 1987 release, "Rhyme Pays," signaled his arrival as an original gangsta with his own style, earning critical accolades from the traditionally insular East Coast rap community. Beyond recording and performing, he leads all other rappers in film and television-drama appearances, with cameos in hip hop's first two films: *Breakin'* and *Breakin' II*. In addition to making several other film appearances, he wrote the rap score for Dennis Hopper's pro-police portrayal of Los Angeles gang life, *Colors*, and he stole the stage as a rogue hip hop cop in Mario Van Peebles's brutal depiction of the life of a crack dealer, *New Jack City*. He also had a role in stimulating the retro-mack revival of the 1990s, reviving the signature tune of Gordon Parks's *Superfly*, rerecording "I'm Your Pusherman" for *Superfly II*. And BBC stations in England have broadcasted his comedy show featuring film reviews in a comedic imitation of TV's *In Living Color*. Blessed with good looks and an original style, he reminds one more of the chic cocaine dealers of Miami or New York than plaid-shirted South Central Los Angeles gangsters. In his single "High Rollers" he chimes: "They dress in diamonds and gold chains / They got the blood of Scarface runnin' through their veins." He can rap hard core or wax eloquent, as in his smash single "The Mind Is a Lethal Weapon." But Ice-T's entire persona shattered with the release of his single "Cop Killer" from his album *Home Invasion*, made with the heavy-metal rockers Body Count. The enraged police establishment refused to provide security at his concerts and called for his censorship. Other songs, such as "KKK Bitch" in which the protagonist rapes, sodomizes, and murders the daughter of a Klansman, raised such controversy that Time Warner eventually dropped Ice-T from Warner Brothers records. He defended his position, telling the *Los Angeles Weekly*, "I try to walk the edge. I'm going to tell you what you need to hear, not what you want to hear."²³

Perhaps no gangsta-rap group embodies more of the mindless anarchy of the genre than Houston's Geto Boys. Ultraviolent, misogynistic, and creative, they reshape the sociopathic antics of Alex and his crew in their own version of *A Clockwork Orange*, which might be called a "blackwork orange." The team has taken the gangsta style to the heartland, reminding the mass audience that Houston's Fifth Ward is just as anarchic as South Central or Compton. The 1989 hit "Mind of a Lunatic" captures the Geto Boys' nihilistic rage:

Paranoid sittin' in a deep sweat
 Thinkin' I got to fuck somebody before the weekend
 The sight of blood excites me
 Shoot you in the head, sit down and watch you bleed to death
 I hear the sound of your last breath

The Geto Boys have produced an imaginative array of raps, including the 1992 single and video “Mind Playin’ Tricks on Me,” the story of a drug dealer tormented by violent dreams and an evil stalker (reminiscent of the Haitian loa of the cemetery, Baron Samedi). The video culminates in a violent assault on the illusory stalker, with the bloodied protagonist carried away in an ambulance. But the Geto Boys’ lives seem to mirror their stage image. Bushwick Bill drank an excessive amount of white lightning and dared his girlfriend to shoot him. The gun accidentally went off, and Bill lost an eye. Bill has also earned the wrath of black feminists for his misogynistic lyrics and frequent use of the word “bitch.” After releasing three albums, the group disbanded and formed again with a local Fifth Ward gangsta, Mr. Mike, replacing Willie D. But it is Mr. Scarface, the group’s leader, who emerges from this chaos with a truly philosophical evaluation. In a 1993 interview he commented, “I don’t do gangsta rap no more. Yeah I’ll give it a new name. . . . It’s gotta be something that’s got to do with the end of something like Armageddon. Revelation. . . we are in the book of Revelations with our raps, cuz.”²⁴

But what makes gangsta rap so appealing to that upper-middle- and middle-class young white male market, especially when more and more gangsta rappers are imitating the “myth of action” (as music critic Dream Hampton labels it) so prevalent in their videos? In an age of mass over consumption and media hype, gangsta rap no doubt represents a religion and ideology of authenticity. From gang colors to “blunts” and “forties” (hip hop vernacular for marijuana and malt liquor), from drive-by shootings to woman abuse, the idea of authenticity holds a maddening appeal for the X generation. These abstract slogans of “real niggaz,” “niggaz for life,” and “bein’ and stayin’ real” summon up romantic notions of ghetto authenticity. Oppressed by the machinery of social regulation and the police state, black and Latino youth have created a substitute social order governed by their own code and rituals of authenticity, but there is no hope to cop stops or dead homies. So as white-bread America searches for a new identity in a post-Soviet, postindustrial, globally interconnected new world order, hip hop speaks to youth’s desire for identity, for a sense of self-definition and purpose, no matter how lawless or pointless. As long as youth culture is dominated by the cult of the commodity, there will be a desire for the “real.”

Yo! rapwitha message

Political or message rap falls into three categories: African centered, neonationalist, and Islamic (dominated by the eclectic Five Percent faction of Muslim blacks). The political rappers emerged in pointed contrast to the macho bravado